Ashamed of Your Religion?

Romans 1:8-17

September 8, 1968

The more I think about it, the more convinced I am that the emotion or experience of shame plays a rather important role in religion. In fact, I'm sure of it. On one level, shame emerges in religion, when we think in terms of the perfect righteousness of God, and our own bobvious imperfection. Religion causes us to examine our selves, our lives, our motivations, and some type of shame is often the result. But that's not the shame I want to think about this morning.

I'm thinking more about shame <u>for</u> our own religion, not because of it: I'm thinking about shame as personal embarassment which sometimes results when we find ourselves in a position where it is convenient not to be conspicuously Christian. I'm thinking more about the image the non-religious attach to religiousness - an image under which many of us bridle and squirm - an image of which we are frequently ashamed.

I'm thinking also of a form of shame that operates on a deeper, more subtle level - in the psyche of the person who is sensitively Christian. This is a shame born of frustration at the apparent weakness of Christianity. This shame results when we sense that the doctrinal statements of the Church sound more and more obsolete; while the church itself proves to be no match for the secular powers in the world all about it.

These are the types of shame I want to think about this morning. I'm ready to admit that I have experienced both of them, and I'd suggest that, if your are alive intellectually in relationship to your church

and your faith, you have experienced them, too.

Now before we get involved in feeling ashamed for feeling shamed let's acknowledge that there is nothing new nor unique about this experience. In fact, allow me to suggest that this emotion I've been describing is tacitly included in no less a document than Paul's great letter to the Romans

The Book of Romans, as it stands in the New Testament, might be described as the "calling-card" of the greatest Christian who ever lived. In the year 1522, Martin Luther wrote of Romans: "This letter is the principal part of the New Testament and the purest gospel, which surely deserves the honor that a Christian man should not merely know it off by heart word for word, but that he should be occupied with it daily as the daily bread of the soul. For it never can be read too often and too well. And the more it is used the more delicious it becomes and the better it tastes...." (Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans)

That, of course, is a slight overstatement, but the fact remains that Paul's letter to the Romans is the first attempt by any man to systemitize the Gospel: it is the first Christian statement of theology, set forth to convince men of the truth of the Gospel.

Shame enters the picture when we consider the situation out of which this document was written and the purpose for which it was written. Consider, for instance, what Paul was about to do. He intended to come to Rome as an ambassador of Jesus Christ, and the typical Roman reaction to that would probably have been a flat, "So What".

Emil Brunner, the great European theologian summarizes what Paul's coming to Rome meant to him - "What Rome meant then is almost beyond our

We must imagine as one all the capital cities of our own day together, from New York and London to Tokyo. He, the Jewish itinerant preacher, is to conquer Rome for Christ. By what means? By the message of a Galilean who was executed as a criminal. In face of the wisdom and might of Rome, to set up the "foolishness of the Cross", this glorification of the powerless one! " (E. Brunner, The Letter to the Romans, p. 15)

When Billy Graham comes to the capital city of one state, in one nation, his coming is best described as an invasion. A team of first-rate public relations men precedes him by one year.

By the time a campaign begins thousands of people have laid the foundation, hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent; the event itself is an extravaganza in the true American fashion, a contemporary "second coming" - Hollywood style.

Paul came alone, unheralded but for his letter; Paul came to the capital of the world, the hub of all civilization. He came with a message no one had heard, a message in direct contra-distinction from what everyone believed: a message that inevitably would be interpreted as treasonous blasphemy when and if enough people heard it. The Romans weren't exactly queing up at the gates of the synagogue to hear Paul - in fact it was the opposite. Rome's reaction would be -"so what".

If we are going to think about shame we have to feel a little of that situation - and then punctuate it with Paul's purpose in coming - not just to see old friends, not as a tourist - but to conquer - men's minds, spirits and lives in the name of this executed Jewish carpenter. That was the situation, and if you are feeling it, the concept of shame ought to be taking some shape in your minds.

Now let's look at his letter. It begins in a traditional fashion: a warm greeting: a statement of Paul's credentials as an apostle: a genuine expression of love for the few Christians in Rome who would initially read the letter: a brief historical review of the roots of this Good News he would bring.

And then suddenly, abruptly, "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is the saving power of God for everyone who has faith...." (1:16) No concept of shame had been discussed, and we can sense it here as a feeling in the heart of the writer as he contemplated the situation he confronted. That is, I am presuming Paul said "I am not ashamed of the Gospel" - precisely because he had been tempted O- or perhaps really felt - shame in the past - and as he prepared to go to Rome.

He had been laughed out of Athens. Bravely he had appeared on the Acropolis, the market-place of ideas, and there had articulated the Good News of Jesus Christ in memorable phraseology, and they laughed at him. Among other things, surely simple human shame was among his feelings that day. Now he faced an ever worse possibility. For if Athens was the seat of cold, analytic intellectualism, Rome was the focus of brutal, secular, cynicism. The Greeks, at least pretended to be learned in things philosophical; the Romans were best known as "drinkers and thinkers and makers of merriment" - the germ of shame must have been in his heart.

And, of course, he sensed the logical futility of what he was about to do. He came in weakness: he brought no mighty institution: he had no list of V.I. P's in the Roman hierarchy to endorse his product. He came as one man against the world, and he had to feel the ripping

uneasiness of shame in his heart.

In many ways the world and situation of the Christian today is different - but I'm ready to say that the difference from Imperial Rome are mostly superficial. We would like to feel that we are a Christian nation, a Christian culture, but we are not. The committed Christian today is not likely to be thrown to the lions, but he very likely will find himself going in an opposite direction from the majority of his fellows. He very likely will feel that pangs of personal persecution if he is true to his convictions and his Lord in areas of controversy in the world.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is essentially no more palatable today in America, than it was in the first century Rome. Contemporary Americans are no more inclined to think seriously about peace and love, and self giving, and being responsible for the oppressed than first century Romans. You don't have to be a prophet to sense that about our situation. All you have to do is talk to your neighbors or read the letters to the editor, or listen to "What's Your Opinion".

We are, of course, far too genteel, far too sophisticated - to help scorn and ridicule upon the genuinely religious, unless in the name of Jesus Christ they thrust their religiosity in our faces - like John Fry is doing - or like Martin Luther King used to do. But mostly American reacts with complete and utter indifference. To be genuinely religious in America today is to be tolerated, benevolently patted on the head on occasion, and called on to speak a good word for middle class morality and a harsh word against anything that threatens the beloved status quo. To be genuinely committed to Jesus Christ today is to be made to feel slightly "out of it" - "not really with it".- A Christian

of the never-never world of fairy tales and Bible stories. And the person who is willing to live out his life on that level of commitment is going to feel something that must be called shame.

On top of that Christianity is in severe intellectual trouble today, to a degree it has not experienced for several hundred years. In the super-charged environment of the "knowledge explosion" the Gospel seems less and less believable; less and less amenable to a mentality that deals comfortably with outer space and computer technology and heart transplants. The Christian today who would articulate his faith in the arena of ideas - without compromising it - is going to feel embarrassed, ashamed - and I think Paul knew a little about that too when he coined the phrase "fools for Christ."

Christianity still comes as a stranger in the halls of power politics, big business and big labor. Our denomination may bravely open a Washington office and it should, but ultimately we are only as influential as the limits of moral persuasion will allow us to be. And for the man who believes deeply - who wants a better world - who is comfortable with the nuances of political manipulation and mass persuasion - that is the source of no little shame.

I think Paul felt all of this as he contemplated his trip to Rome; as he assessed his possibilities there in terms of experiences such as he had in Athens. And out of his own agonizing - his own feeling of shame - I believe he wrote these words: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is the saving power of God for everyone..." Let me add one word

and accentuate another. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel. Because it is the saving power of God for everyone..."

You see, Paul's scope was a bit broader than ours is inclined to be. For him the Gospel was not just the reiteration of the story of Jesus, it was an event. It was an event suffused with the pwer of God, an event that was still happening. God had not brought down the curtain on the story of Jesus Christ. Rather it was an ongoing drama and Paul saw himself simply as one of the actors, at a certain time and place in history. His responsibility was to play his part faithfully. And as an actor with a bit part might feel ashamed rehearsing that part in front of the whole cast - over and over again - so Paul felt shame. But when he acknowledged that the whole drama was not completed - that the efficacy of his small part depended not so much on its unique excellence, as upon his fidelity to it - his shame could become confidence.

If I may borrow a good phrase from a younger generation, our "hang-up" is that we see Christianity at best as the honoring and celebrating of ancient truth, and at worst, as the monotonous retelling of old, worn out stories. And if that is all it is - we may be justifiably ashamed of it.

The fact is that the Gospel is still happening. It is as contemporary as this new day and this new week. It is as immediate as your relationship with yourffamily or the person sitting next to you.

It began, of course, at a given point - in the fulness of time - when in complete love God came into human history in Jesus Christ. But the kessence of it is that that miracle - that event is still happening.

Jesus Christ keeps on coming into the world and even into your life and mine. The Gospel keeps on happening where individual people like you and me commit our lives in faith and obedience - and live those lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Looking at it from different angles there is a lot about being a Christian that can produce shame. But from the only angle that really matters - from the angle of this drama which continues, which needs and used your life, your efforts, your faith - there is reason for nothing but confidence.

With our lives, then, as well as our lips, let us be saying:

"We are not ashamed of the Gospel. Because it is the saving power of God."

Amen.